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A Life-Changing Internship and the Power of Experiential Learning

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I have worked in higher education for my entire professional career. After starting as an assistant professor at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), I was an engineering professor at the University of California, Berkeley for more than 20 years. I had the wonderful opportunity to return to UT Austin in 2008, where I served as dean of the Cockrell School of Engineering and then as provost. Today, I am the president of UT Austin.

But before decades of teaching and research, I was a student. And my understanding of the learning process and the power of thoughtful, immersive educational experiences was forged before I committed myself to teaching students, advancing research and, ultimately, leading a flagship university.

I remember it well: one humid summer in New York City, 1977. I had a paid internship at Weidlinger Associates, an engineering firm in midtown Manhattan. At the time, I was an engineering student at Cornell University and only beginning to grasp the fundamental concepts that underlie the discipline. In classrooms and labs, my professors had been engaging, and the coursework was rigorous. But I felt it was not enough and that I needed new experiences to appreciate what I had been learning. The internship gave me that opportunity.

At Weidlinger, I was immediately put to work. There was no grace period, no tentative first steps. Just a room with a large, very advanced (for the time) computer system, and tons of lines of code that needed to be written. And, even more daunting, the program I was working on was going to be used on some of the biggest projects at the firm. There were high expectations that had not been present at Cornell. This work was not for a grade — it was much more important.

That entire summer was eye-opening for me. Every day at 8 a.m., I would get the chance to learn something new and try out ideas I had come up with the previous evening. Even though I was young and inexperienced, I felt that I was making progress. My supervisor mentored me and gave me the confidence to solve problems and learn from my mistakes. The job showed me that there was a seemingly limitless number of challenges I could take on as an engineer. I was hooked.

I would eventually decide to attend graduate school, and my life's journey took off from there. The internship had affirmed that I was, indeed, capable of making meaningful, practical contributions as an engineer. It stoked my curiosity and instilled in me a sense of purpose.

It has been four decades since that internship, but it still shapes the way I look at learning and the student experience. Since my first days as president of UT Austin, I have worked with departments throughout the campus and with many faculty members who are continuously evaluating their curricula and transforming the learning environment so that students are increasingly given the chance to learn through *experience*.

Every student has a major and topics of interest. There are fundamental ideas and theoretical concepts that are foundational to each discipline. But the attainment of basic understanding should not be the end of the learning process — it should be the beginning.

In life, many problems and tough issues do not fit into neat packages that can be evaluated or solved within a week or even a semester. They do not simply require one line of thinking or an expert with a singular understanding of a topic. Complex challenges can be addressed only with creative, interdisciplinary solutions. And, students need to understand how to search for answers and bring together varied strands of knowledge while working with individuals who have different talents, experiences, and backgrounds to draw upon.

Though bolstered by personal experience, my focus on experiential learning is informed by higher education researchers, psychologists, scientists and many faculty members I have worked with over the years. David Kolb's *Experiential Learning* (1984) was published at the beginning of my career as a professor. He defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Experience can be grasped and transformed in many settings. Internships, jobs and travel opportunities for students can be very impactful, but experiential learning can, and should, also take place *inside* the classroom, whether or not students are able to participate in co-ops or internships. As Scott Wurdinger and Julie Carlson (2010) argue, experiential learning is "first and foremost a learning process" and "students do not need to leave the classroom to learn experientially" (p. 11).

At UT Austin, Provost Maurie McInnis assembled the Experiential Learning Faculty Working Group in 2017. The working group brought together faculty members from throughout the university to understand how to develop, scale, and integrate experiential learning in UT Austin's degree programs. The group met and led research for five months and has published a report with plans for a comprehensive initiative that is centered on the expansion of classroom-based experiential learning for the benefit of all undergraduates.

The experiential learning opportunities available to UT Austin students both on and off campus increase each year. In the McCombs School of Business, there is the Real Estate Investment Fund, which gives students a chance to manage a multimillion-dollar public-private real estate investment fund. In the School of Architecture, students are collaborating with City of Austin officials to examine issues including housing equity, transportation and the current and future role of the Austin Convention Center. In the College of Fine Arts, arts and entertainment technologies students are working in teams to design 2-D and 3-D video games and create animated projections paired with original musical compositions. These are just a few examples, but there are hundreds more within every department and school at UT Austin.

During every phase of our careers and lives, experience is capable of teaching us so much about ourselves, our potential, our limitations and what we need to learn. To truly understand, a person must learn their own lessons, fail, try, and discover success. The next generation of students must have the opportunity to do this. And the more that universities and faculty members can empower their students to learn, explore and, most significantly, experience, the better prepared they will be to lead meaningful and purposeful lives long after graduation.

Greg Fenves, Ph.D., is the 29th president of The University of Texas at Austin. Since 2015, he and his administration have worked to expand access to the university for talented students across the state of Texas. He has prioritized diversity and inclusion, invested heavily in faculty and their research, expanded experiential learning opportunities for students and has overseen strategic efforts that have helped lead to the highest four-year graduation rates in UT Austin's history.

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